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### Food and Cultural Politics: A Culinary Lens into Teaching American Art and Culture

Evie Terrono

*Randolph-Macon College*

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## Food and Cultural Politics: a Culinary Lens into Teaching American Art and Culture

Evie Terrono  
*Randolph-Macon College*

From the profusion of fruits in portraits of American colonial women, to still lifes, to the work of Andy Warhol (1928-1987), Alison Knowles' (1933– ) *Make a Salad* (1962), Martha Rosler's (1943– ) *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975, Museum of Modern Art, New York), and Kara Walker's (1969– ) *A Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014), foodstuff and foodways in American art and culture have been and continue to be inextricably connected with contemporary cultural politics. Yet, little attention has been devoted to the didactic potential and the ideological complexities of these expressions in American visual and material culture. Food Studies have dominated academic inquiry in major interdisciplinary programs, with the *Association for the Study of Food and Society* and its journal *Food, Culture & Society* exploring the interconnectedness of foodstuff and foodways to humanistic, sociological, and scientific concerns. In American art history, however, only recently has the work of Katherine Manthorne, Shana Klein, and Lauren Freese among few others, complemented the pioneering studies of Pamela Simpson and Karal Ann Marling.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, this expanding scholarship on American foodways and its pedagogical implications prompted my development of an undergraduate honor's course entitled "Food for Thought: Food and Politics in American Art and Culture."

In tandem with the scholarly inquiries above, the 2013-2014 *Art and Appetite* exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute, highlighted the broad analytical possibilities in American art and culture in terms of food-related art and culinary

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<sup>1</sup> Pamela H. Simpson, *Corn Palaces and Butter Queens: A History of Crop Art and Dairy Sculpture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), and Karal Ann Marling, "She Brought Forth Butter in a Lordly Dish": The Origins of Minnesota Butter Sculpture," *Minnesota History* 50, no. 6 (Summer 1987): 218-228. My course was ongoing when the 2017 College Art Association session on the Gustatory Turn took place, and preceded the publication of the *Panorama* volume dedicated to the Gustatory Turn. See, Shana Klein and Guy Jordan, "[The Gustatory Turn in American Art](#)," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2017). I am grateful to Shana Klein, who had generously shared with me unpublished scholarship, now part of her recently published book, Shana Klein, *The Fruits of Empire* (University of California Press, 2020). Katherine Manthorne is currently working on a book-length study on *Sweet Fortunes: Sugar Trade & Art Patronage in America*.

implements.<sup>2</sup> [\*Conflict Kitchen\*](#) in Pittsburgh provided yet another paradigm for the explicit connections between food and politics. This culinary venture, now closed although continuing its educational mission, introduced Americans to the cuisine of countries, or ethnic regions, with which the United States was in conflict, and exposed the political undercurrents of food traditions and practices.

Lastly, central to my considerations of the content and the structure of this course was my participation in 2015 in [\*Culinary Culture: The Politics of American Foodways, 1765-1900\*](#), an interdisciplinary seminar at the American Antiquarian Society, led by art historian Nancy Siegel, which provided the scaffolding for this course in its integration of in-class learning combined with diverse experiential components. The seminar foregrounded the complex socio-cultural implications of food through the study of paintings, prints and decorative arts, ceramics, and china, including presidential china, and visual ephemera, such as food labels, and commercial advertising, and many primary sources, among them diaries and cookbooks. Seminar participants also collectively prepared and shared a historically accurate meal at Sturbridge Village.

Structural Considerations in “Food for Thought: Food and Politics in American Art and Culture.”

In choosing the title for my course, “Food for Thought: Food and Politics in American Art and Culture,” I sought to assert its interdisciplinary focus, underscore the ideological complexity of American visual and material culture, and engage students not only in aesthetic considerations, but most importantly in broader socio-cultural issues from the eighteenth through the twenty-first century. Through a diverse array of readings students analyzed food symbolism, racial and economic stereotyping, depictions of production and labor, the provision and circulation of food stuff, excess or deprivation at various historical moments, and

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<sup>2</sup> Judith A. Barter, Ed. [\*Art and Appetite: American Painting, Culture, and Cuisine\*](#) (Chicago: The Art Institute, 2013). At the time of the course, the Detroit Art Institute presented *Bitter/Sweet: Coffee, Tea, Chocolate: Consuming the World*. Although the exhibition and the resultant catalogue referenced primarily the European tastes for such exotic fineries, it also highlighted the transatlantic networks of exchange that proliferated the epicurean attachment to these drinks and the broad material culture that developed around them in terms of specialized furniture and ceramics, see, Yao-Fen You et al., *Coffee, Tea and Chocolate: Consuming the World* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Art, 2016). Also relevant to this course was the exhibition, [\*Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen\*](#), Museum of Modern Art New York, 2011. Also see, Juliet Kinchin and Aidan O’Connor, *Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011).

issues of gender, race and social status, as related to food production and consumption.<sup>3</sup>

In the course, I privileged thematic threads that reinforced both ideological continuities, and historical ruptures relative to food-related concerns and their connections to the cultural context in which they were produced. Although I arranged the topics in a roughly chronological manner, I did not aim to cover the totality of canonical, must-know works, usually addressed in surveys of American art.<sup>4</sup> Rather, I focused on in-depth inquiries that contextualized food related art works and cultural artifacts within a broader socio-historical framework, thus satisfying explicitly institutional curricular objectives in visual literacy and historical awareness. In the absence of a textbook, sequential readings provided an internal thread in tying together historical and cultural developments. The objective was to support students, initially by modeling for them textual analysis, and then buttressing their own efforts in analyzing required readings in both peer-to-peer exercises, and also in leading class discussions. With limited lecturing, I created a structure that privileged guided conversations that empowered students to generate informed analysis both in class exercises, in their research project, and in their self-evaluations of the experiential components of the course. Through interconnected thematic units, discussed below, the course maintained meanings across time, and prompted students to engage comparatively, rather than linearly with the topics discussed. This practice aimed to facilitate a deep understanding of ideas rather than mere memorization of facts and to prepare students for independent research and synthesis in their final project.

Deliberately, the structure of the course took into consideration ongoing racial and historical debates, particularly relevant in Virginia, because of its fraught cultural politics in the past and in the present. I took advantage of our geographic proximity to major sites of historical memory and cultural tourism such as plantations, presidential homes, and other sites of colonial culture, both authentic and recreated, and access to major collections of art and material culture, not only

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<sup>3</sup> Of the eleven students in attendance, three were majors in art history, while the rest were freshmen without any previous exposure to the discipline.

<sup>4</sup> For effective learning strategies, beyond coverage, in affecting the development of critical perception and other transferable skills see, Julia A. Sienkewicz, "Against the 'Coverage' Mentality: Rethinking Learning Outcomes and the Core Curriculum," *Art History Pedagogy and Practice*, 1, no. 1 (2016): 1-14 <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol1/iss1/5> (accessed 27 Sep. 2019). The thematic emphasis in this course presents limited opportunities to explore American sculpture and architecture, particularly modernist architecture, and this might be a potential shortcoming for those aiming for broader coverage.

in Richmond, but also in Washington, DC.<sup>5</sup> In integrating theoretical perspectives with object-based learning during museum visits, I encouraged students to interrogate the ideological and didactic implications of curatorial choices and institutional objectives, and apply what they learned in class to on-site learning exercises.

Lastly, the course included a social concern component. In order to alert the college community about food insecure populations in the Richmond area, and cultivate social responsibility for the common good, students conducted a food drive and published their research in the form of a cookbook that they sold as a fundraiser at the college's annual Research Day.<sup>6</sup>

### Thematic strands

Patriotism, nationalism, femininity versus masculinity, labor exploitation and production, ethnic and racial stereotyping, and gendered concerns expressed through food or food-related practices expanded our understanding of American art, history, and culture. The following discussion represents some of the thematic foci of the course, and reinforces the ways in which this course negotiated concerns over coverage, while capitalizing on the rhetorical potential of art and material culture to facilitate access to complex cultural messaging. Reflecting on the pioneering scholarship of Jules David Prown, and his assertion that "objects do embody and reflect cultural beliefs," and on more recent studies on the utility, and indeed necessity, of integrating material culture in art historical analysis, the course focused on everyday objects in order to evidence their ideological currency in their historical context.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A number of historic sites and historic homes in Virginia have undertaken revisions of their interpretative programs towards more inclusive and diverse narratives. For the reinterpretation of the kitchen to include the experiences of black servants at Maymont, a Gilded Age estate in Richmond, Virginia see, Elizabeth O'Leary, "The Maymont Staff: A View from the Kitchen," In *From Morning to Night: Domestic Service at Maymont* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 75-120.

<sup>6</sup> Although I was unaware of it at the time of course, in 2017 Keri Watson, at the University of Central Florida, organized a traveling exhibition entitled [\*In the Eyes of the Hungry: Florida's Changing Landscape\*](#). The exhibition featured a food drive and student-made bowls were sold to raise money for Florida's Food Bank.

<sup>7</sup> See, Jules David Prown, "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture and Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 71, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 3. The scholarship in this area is expanding. Among others see, Michael Yonan, "Towards a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies," *West 86<sup>th</sup>* 18, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2011): 232-248.

The introductory session on “Culinary Practices, Tea Boycotts, and Democratic Ideals in the Colonial Period,” situated many of the thematic subsets pursued for the duration of the course, namely the interdependence of nationalistic or socio-culturally charged questions with the daily practices in the production, preparation, and consumption of food. Nancy Siegel’s work on patriotic foodstuff and the intersections of female political and social activism and the domestic sphere through tea boycotts in the 1760s, as well as the preparation of desserts with meaningful names such as Independence Cake, Federal Cake and Election Cake, underscored female political agency at a time when legal limitations and social expectations restricted women’s participation in the public realm.<sup>8</sup> The study of print media provided insights into the ways in which American colonial women used foodstuff as a means for political maneuvering and negotiation in the public sphere in the eighteenth century, and as an expression of their opposition to British rule, topics that are not often articulated in surveys of American art.<sup>9</sup> Students also considered the ways in which American colonial women who consciously participated in political debates were actors in global networks of material exchange through the purchase of ceramics and other utilitarian and decorative art objects imprinted with political iconography.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent visits to the museums at Colonial Williamsburg and engagement with their repositories of American colonial culture underpinned the connections between material artifacts and emergent definitions of American colonial nationalism.

Readings on the broad cultural imprint of nationalist ideologies and of the unifying political rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and Divine Providence that undergirded the early Republic and the nation throughout the nineteenth century, supported discussions of numerous paintings of American territorial expansion and husbandry in the 1820s. In the post-bellum period, Winslow Homer’s [\*The Veteran in a New Field\*](#) (1865, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), reinforced both the devastating losses brought by the Civil War, and the promise of bountiful prosperity and America’s future. It also helped us grapple with the unresolved grievances over Civil War memory that played out in contemporary

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy Siegel, “Cooking up Politics,” *Gastronomica* 8, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 53-61, and Caroline Frank, “The Art of Tea, Revolution and an American East Indies Trade,” in Patricia Johnston and Caroline Frank, Eds. *Global Trade and Visual Arts in Federal New England* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2014): 27-49. The readings above launched considerations of the political implications of colonial and early federal recipes, particularly as I was preparing this course in the heated climate of the 2016 presidential election.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Philip Dawe(?), [\*A Society of Patriotic Ladies, at Edenton in North Carolina\*](#), mezzotint, 1775, 13 3/4 x 10 inches, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>10</sup> *Ceramics in America* is an excellent publication with many articles exploring the socio-political significance of ceramics in the United States.

confrontations over the memory and the commemoration of the Civil War throughout 2016 and 2017.<sup>11</sup> Homer's numerous interpretations of hunters and fishermen also provided pathways for understanding gendered tensions at the turn of the nineteenth century, when threats of the feminization of American culture generated a host of pictorial and literary responses focused on masculinity.<sup>12</sup>

### Gendered Perspectives

Debates over domesticity and its signification in depictions of women around the hearth, the kitchen, and food preparation were central in many discussions. Such images either reinforced domestic stability at times of collective, national anxieties, or demonstrated gendered resistance as women disavowed these duties at historical moments of political self-fashioning and self-determination. Food as an encoded political and social discourse of gendered inclusion or exclusion, and as a marker of social and political identity and mobility framed our conversations of Lily Martin Spencer's (1822-1902) works through the interpretative analysis of April Masten's article in which she argues for the significance of their iconography in the evolving gender debates of the Jacksonian democracy and its aftermath.<sup>13</sup> The study of Spencer's often humorous scenes, including [\*Shake Hands\*](#) (c. 1854, Ohio Historical Society) and [\*Young Husband, First Marketing\*](#) (1854, The Metropolitan Museum of Art), challenged the gendered status quo, and exposed potential claims of gender egalitarianism, in the context of concurrent debates on women's suffrage and political activism.

In eschewing intractable stylistic definitions and chronological boundaries, often employed in survey courses, and through meaningful diachronic comparisons, the course aimed to convey shared and persistent political negotiations among artists and across time. By comparing Spencer's interpretations of women in the domestic, and more specifically the culinary sphere, with Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, students interrogated the ongoing gendered polemics from the mid-nineteenth through the late twentieth century across disparate media and pictorial expressions. In opposition to Spencer's seeming pictorial docility,

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Kent Wilson, "Winslow Homer's 'The Veteran in a New Field': A Study of the Harvest Metaphor and Popular Culture," *American Art Journal* 17, no. 4 (Autumn 1985): 2-27.

<sup>12</sup> I am borrowing here Ann Douglas' term see, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977). For Homer and the significance of masculinity in sustaining hopes of northern revitalization and national well-being in the post-bellum period see, Sarah Burns, "Revitalizing the 'Painted-Out' North: Winslow Homer, Manly Health, and New Regionalism in Turn-of-the-Century America," *American Art* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 20-37.

<sup>13</sup> April F. Masten, "'Shake Hands?' Lily Martin Spencer and the Politics of Art," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (June 2004): 348-394.



Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* pronounced the dissonances, and the distinctly mechanistic, and even aggressive, tensions of the "housewife," as reflective of the vociferous and much-contested claims of second-wave feminists for political, social, and economic egalitarianism. Both works were analyzed in an ideological continuum of female subjectivity as both challenged the limiting parameters of domesticity.

Through the investigation of a broad gamut of pictorial evidence across high art and print media, students explored the advancements that women made in the public sphere, that were often in tension with ongoing demands for them to retreat into the domestic sphere in the early twentieth century. Recurring socio-cultural anxieties, the result of increasing immigration, internal population movements, and rising economic concerns brought about a renewed attention on domesticity and on women as guardians of both household economies, and of the national well-being throughout the 1920s and 1930s. These came to the forefront in our discussions on agrarianism and the revitalized emphasis on the American land, as the source of national sustenance and cultural preservation in the context of American Regionalism.

Our study of propagandistic posters of [Victory Gardens](#), which often featured vigilant women at the horticultural home front and the supervisory politics of food rations, disclosed for students the energetic commitment to maintaining the gendered status quo in both World War I and increasingly in World War II and in its aftermath.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, but in oppositional ways, exhibition spaces that proclaimed the efficiency and comfort of escalating mechanization in domestic spaces and new technologies in the preservation and preservation of food, as those presented in the [Electric Kitchen in the Town of Tomorrow at the 1939 New York World's Fair](#), maintained women within the domestic space and thus divorced them from alternative paths to professionalization, or from active participation in the public political and economic sphere, prompting fruitful discussions about corporate control of individual and collective attitudes.<sup>15</sup>

## Racial Concerns

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<sup>14</sup> See, Terrence H. Witkowski, "World War II Poster Campaigns: Preaching Frugality to American Consumers," *Journal of Advertising* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 69-82.

<sup>15</sup> For the increased mechanization of food production and for the technological facilitations in farms at mid-century that further reinforced gendered spaces see, Sarah Rovang, "Envisioning the Future of Modern Farming: The Electrified Farm at the 1939 New York World's Fair," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 74, no. 2 (June 2015): 213-218.



Given the preponderance of racialized images in high art and advertising, and in a variety of artifacts, a number of readings focused on the historical and ongoing authority of such exemplars of material culture in proliferating prejudicial racial stereotypes. Particular emphasis was placed on tracing exclusionary narratives and re-evaluating their cultural and political agendas in popularizing closely-edited versions of the American past. Readings on plantation economy, and the physical arrangement and spatial encoding of residential sites provided insights into the true interdependencies between masters and their enslaved laborers in the fields and in domestic settings.<sup>16</sup> Digital resources complemented print scholarship and augmented opportunities for critical evaluations of their narrative emphasis and their exclusions. For example, students read a blog entry entitled [“Thomas Jefferson: Culinary Revolutionary,”](#) on the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation site. In the post, James Hemmings, the brother of Sally Hemmings, is identified by name and the contributions of African food staples such as okra, black-eyed peas, red peas, and eggplant are cited. Little credit, however, was bestowed on the enslaved laborers who cultivated Jefferson’s plantations, or on Hemmings’ contributions, even though he trained as a chef in France and taught the art to his brother Peter.<sup>17</sup> Students also learned about [Hercules, Washington’s chef,](#) who although praised and valued for his contributions, nevertheless escaped Mount Vernon, thus exposing the complicated relationships between masters and slaves.<sup>18</sup> To reinforce such dissonances we considered Junius Stearns’ (1810-1885) [George Washington as a Farmer at Mount Vernon](#) (1851, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts), and analyzed the depiction of a benevolent Washington supervising his enslaved laborers in the production of wheat at Mount Vernon. We also contrasted such benign images with Juan Logan’s (1946 – ) [Foundation with Beam 1](#), (2004, Collection of the artist) in which the artist literally exposed the buttressing of the financial health of southern plantations and their crop economies on the backs of their enslaved laborers.

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<sup>16</sup> See, Maurie McInnis “The Most Famous Plantation of All: The Politics of Mount Vernon,” in *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, Angela Mack and Stephen G. Hoffius, Eds. (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2008): 86-109, and Dell Upton, “White and Black Landscape in Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” In *Material Life in America, 1600-1860*, Robert Blair, Ed. (Boston: Northeastern University, 1988), 357-369.

<sup>17</sup> At the time of the course, the content was accessible at the following link which is currently inactive.: <https://www.history.org/Foundation/journal/summer13/jefferson.cfm>. For its content see, Ed Crews, “Thomas Jefferson: Culinary Revolutionary,” *Colonial Williamsburg Journal* 35, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 56-63.

<sup>18</sup> For new inclusive interpretations of Mount Vernon see, Carol Borchert Cadou, Ed. *Stewards of Memory: The Past, Present, and the Future of Historic Preservation*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018).

In discussing *Monticello*, the emphasis shifted from Jefferson as a gentleman-architect employing European influences to designing his estate, to *Monticello* as the center of a complex slave economy.<sup>19</sup> We deliberated the contradictions in Jefferson's espousal of free, independent yeomen as the foundation of the republic, and his identity as slave owner at his plantation. This approach coincided with ongoing efforts at *Monticello* to reconstruct Mulberry Row and re-imagine the lives of enslaved peoples at Jefferson's estates.<sup>20</sup> By problematizing *Monticello* through the dependencies that housed the enslaved laborers at Mulberry Row, the site provided opportunities for meaningful discussions of the long-standing exclusions of these narratives from historic sites and from American art textbooks.

Aiming to discomfort the students' familiarity with daily necessities, such as sugar and rice, and unveil the deep political undercurrents of their cultivation, readings, visuals, and on-site visits reinforced the interdependence of the lives of enslaved workers and of their masters in the production of common foodstuff. Rice plantations allowed us to discuss both the ties to rice-producing areas in western Africa, which were often coincidentally the centers of the slave trade, and the transference of knowledge and the implementation of such practices in the Lowcountry of South Carolina.<sup>21</sup> Illustrated by Thomas Coram's (1757-1811) *View of Mulberry, House and Street* (c. 1800, Gibbes Museum of Art), the narrative made evident the proximity between this manor house, the center of a massive rice plantation, and the clay huts of its enslaved laborers arranged neatly in symmetrical rows on either side of the house, alerting students to the mundane but also discomforting interdependence of masters and slaves on southern plantations.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A 2019-2020 exhibition at the Chrysler Museum, and its accompanying catalogue, explored these dualities in Jefferson's identity see, *Thomas Jefferson, Architect: Palladian Models, Democratic Principles, and the Conflict of Ideals* see <https://chrysler.org/exhibition/thomas-jefferson-architect-palladian-models-democratic-principles-and-the-conflict-of-ideals/> (accessed 28 Oct. 2019).

<sup>20</sup> See, The Practice of Slavery at Monticello <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/the-practice-of-slavery-at-monticello/> (accessed 3 Oct. 2019). For the commitment of American presidents to agricultural undertakings see, "The Founders, Farms and Facts," in History-Essays, The Lehrman Institute <https://lehrmaninstitute.org/history/founders-farms-facts.html> (accessed 3 Aug. 2019).

<sup>21</sup> A subsequent visit to the exhibit entitled *Rice Fields in the Lowcountry*, at the National Museum of African American History and Culture provided pathways for more in-depth analysis of the classroom content.

<sup>22</sup> In a telling juxtaposition the illustration and the coverage of the plantation in *Architectural Digest* completely evaded the issue of slavery, although recognized that this was once a rice plantation, stressing instead the architectural significance of the house see, Howard Christian, "Go Inside a

Conversely, Shana Klein's study of the still lifes of Robert Duncanson in the context of northern abolitionism in Cincinnati, documented the enlightened preoccupation with horticulture among Duncanson's abolitionist patrons in Cincinnati and an ideological proximity between the black painter and his white patrons. Klein analyzes the coded "racial profiling of fruit," during the period, categorizing fruits by the color of their skins, and pointing to the concern over varietal mixing as a reflection of ongoing fears of miscegenation.<sup>23</sup> Klein's discussion of the debates over sugar and abolitionism at mid-century also supported a racialized reading of Lilly Martin Spencer's [\*Kiss Me and You'll Kiss the 'Lasses\*](#), (1856, Brooklyn Museum).

These critical interpolations with dominant, but often partial, historical narratives and the rhetorical function of both art and objects as conduits to often overlooked historical realities, came to the forefront in our examination of the fraught political testimonials of both Betty Saar's (1926 – ) iconic *Aunt Jemima* (1972) and Kara Walker's monumental *A Subtlety* (2014).<sup>24</sup> By collapsing the diachronic distances between the plantation economies of sugar production and Kara Walker's incendiary work, students interrogated interpretations of American art that often privilege aesthetic concerns over cultural politics. The freighted ways in which many visitors to the exhibit interacted with the work, through intrusive and suggestive gestures captured on selfies, engaged us in discussions about body politics, notions of bodily idealism, and more extensively questions of eugenics and racial discrimination centered around food exhibits, such as those that were presented in American world's fairs.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, we discussed fair trade policies

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Historic South Carolina Plantation House Turned Family Home," *Architectural Digest* 7 June 2016. <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/mulberry-plantation-south-carolina> (accessed 7 Sept. 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Shana Klein, "Cultivating Fruit and Equality: The Still-Life Paintings of Robert Duncanson," *American Art* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 76.

<sup>24</sup> The work attracted much press see, Hilton Als, "The Sugar Sphinx," *The New Yorker* 8 May 2014 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-sugar-sphinx> (accessed 1 Oct. 2019), and Roberta Smith, "Sugar? Sure, But Salted With Meaning," *The New York Times* 11 May, 2014 <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/12/arts/design/a-subtlety-or-the-marvelous-sugar-baby-at-the-domino-plant.html> (accessed 1 Oct. 2019).

<sup>25</sup> At the time of the course, I was unaware of Henri Maillard's exhibition of a statue of Venus, accompanied by life-size statues of Minerva and Columbus at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. I have since integrated this reference in my courses on American and African American art because students are fascinated with life-size food sculptures that provide entry points in discussing their complicated socio-cultural meanings, in this case imperialism, classicism, and the privileging of a Eurocentric culture, curiously re-interpreted in dark chocolate. For a brief exploration of these sculptures see, Nicholas Westbrook, "Chocolates at the World's Fairs, 1851-1964" in Louis Evan Grivetti and Howard-Yana Shapiro, Eds. *Chocolate: History, Culture, and Heritage* (Hoboken:

and the contemporary exploitation of both natural resources and indigenous workers in the production of chocolate prompted by the chocolate busts in Janine Antoni's (1964 – ) *Lick and Lather* (1993) which was acquired by the National Gallery of Art in 2016, and which explores both body politics, and sexual desire, alongside the socially-coded consumption of exotic foods such as sugar and chocolate, which were once both dependent on the labor of the enslaved.

Visual and ideological palimpsests reinforced the cyclical nature of some of our concerns, grounded in the historical experience, and still persistent in the pictorial and material culture of our own time. Shana Klein's work on the racist meaning of watermelon eating, provided the cultural context for the pervasive racial stereotyping in the consumption of watermelon, as we studied the much derided [2014 cartoon of president Obama](#) by Jerry Holbert, published in *The Boston Herald*. This most persistent trope of black gluttony, suggested lack of control and an overt sign of excess and bodily desire, and proliferated in hundreds of postcards in the twentieth century and other objects of culinary consumption. The tenacity of the iconography in the work of contemporary artists, among them Michael Ray Charles (1967 – ) *Lifesaball (Forever Free)*, 1995 and Joyce Scott (1948 – ) *Man Eating Watermelon*, (1986, Philadelphia Museum of Art) both affirmed the sign's endurance, but also ridiculed its legitimacy.<sup>26</sup> Racist proclivities expressed through common prejudicial markers within a broad verbal and visual lexicon sensitized students to their ubiquity in food labels, advertisements, postcards, and works of art. Through the study of food labels, such as the one for *N----- Head Oysters*, to racialized depictions in commercially available postcards of black bodies as potentially edible, including black babies threatened by alligators, students pondered the circulation and popularization of such imagery and its attendant racist ideologies through mundane networks of middle-class consumerism.

Similarly, the stereotypical depictions of jovial and subservient familiar figures on commercial products and advertisements such as Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben, and the ubiquitous presence of the black man in Cream of Wheat advertisements, highlighted the incongruity of their persistent use at a time of heightened political activism throughout 2016-2017 and among calls for the purging of racist imagery from American culture. The antinomical interpretations of these typological

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Wiley, 2009), 185-205. Students also considered the connections between alimentary and bodily hygiene and eugenics in the work of John Harvey Kellogg and the Race Betterment Movement exhibition at the Panama-Pacific Exhibition in 1915.

<sup>26</sup> See, Ashley Killough, "Boston Herald Apologizes for Obama Cartoon After Backlash," CNN Politics <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/01/politics/boston-herald-cartoon/index.html> (accessed 28 Oct. 2019).

characters in Betty Saar's iconic *Aunt Jemima* (1972) and Karen Cox's, (1960 – ) *The Liberation of UB and Lady J* (1998) showcased the subversive appropriation and the neutralization of such racist tropes in the work of African American artists.<sup>27</sup> The work of Kyla Wazana Tompkins amplified these analytical frameworks and positioned these inquiries within the literary boundaries of well-known 19th century novels, among them Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which food metaphors are employed to mark the enslaved as commodified objects to be savored, bought, and sold. Significant in this respect was the figure of Chloe, the black female Mammy, who according to Tompkins holds an "empowered place in the household," although her power is compromised through "the broad vernacular of her speech and her embrace of manual labor."<sup>28</sup> Tompkins' reading of the centrality of Chloe in the southern antebellum kitchen and her interaction with her master's family anticipated in many ways the problematics of the relations of black domestics to their white southern mistresses in the movie *The Help* (2011), which reinforced the persistence of these interdependencies into the Civil Rights era.<sup>29</sup>

Through powerful, contrasting works, students came to understand the realities of the post-World War II era that ushered in transformative rifts in American society through the racial and feminist radicalism of the times. Gordon Park's [\*At a Segregated Fountain, Mobile, Alabama, 1956\*](#) foregrounded our discussions of inextricable connections between racial and food politics in the Civil Rights movement. The joyful abundance of the ice scream stand in Gordon Parks' work, and the propriety of the subjects' clothing, an all-American scene, are violated by the exclusionary realities of the white-only sign that demarcates the limits of

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<sup>27</sup> We explored the symbolism of the Mammy as a trope of black subservience in numerous magazine advertisements at mid-century, and its use as a formal structure for restaurants or in the names of restaurants, see Edward Weston's *Mammy's Cupboard in Natchez, Mississippi*, 1941, and the undermining of this myth in Andy Warhol's *Mammy, Myths Portfolio*, (1981). In response to escalating calls for racial justice and the toppling of racist imagery in the summer of 2020, Quaker Company, a subsidiary of PepsiCo, announced the removal of the name and the image of Aunt Jemima from its syrup and pancake mix. For the responses of women artists who critiqued the stereotype in their work see, Maximiliano Durón, "[Artists Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold, and Renee Cox Called for Aunt Jemima's Liberation Years Ago](#)," ARTnews, 19 June 2020. Other companies followed suit in removing racialized imagery see, Maria Cramer, "After Aunt Jemima, Reviews Underway for Uncle Ben, Mrs. Butterworth and Cream of Wheat," *The New York Times* 17 June 2020 and updated 10 Feb. 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/business/aunt-jemima-mrs-butterworth-uncle-ben.html> (accessed 14 Feb. 2021)

<sup>28</sup> Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "'Everything 'Cept Eat Us': The Antebellum Black Body Portrayed as Edible Body," *Callaloo* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 210.

<sup>29</sup> Critics challenged the minimization of Jim Crow violence in both the book and the film see, Alyssa Rosenberg, "[The Help': Softening Segregation for a Feel-Good Flick](#)," *The Atlantic*, 10 August 2011.

access to the enjoyment of the most mundane treat. In tandem with our analysis of [Negro Motorist Green books](#), students understood the extraordinary limitations that African Americans faced as they traveled around the country seeking food and shelter that ultimately led them to confront exclusionary practices through widespread passive resistance measures. Lunch counter sit-ins made the connection between food and activism evident and provided avenues for meaningful discourse about racial exclusions and marginalizations. The fact that luncheon counter sit-ins also took place in Richmond evidenced the widespread segregation of the most basic human experiences, and that was further reinforced when students saw Jacob Lawrence's (1917–2000) *Dixie Café* (1948) at the National Museum of African American History and Culture.<sup>30</sup> Works such as these framed our dialogues into key dichotomies: who belonged and who did not, Americanness and otherness, plenty and poverty, past and present.

These considerations framed our discussions of the works of Andy Warhol, Claus Oldenburg (1929 – ), and Tom Wesselman (1931–2004), often seen as expressive of consumerist excess and Americanness, that provided a seemingly accessible, engaging, and easily “consumed,” entry-point to more complex cultural questions.<sup>31</sup> These works assumed deeper meaning, however, when analyzed against the scarcity that many African Americans encountered during the same period and the politicization of lunches, through the free Food Programs of the Black Panther Party that aimed to raise awareness of the daily social and economic inequities that African Americans encountered.<sup>32</sup> The profound politicization of food in the Black Panther food program, which we studied through photographic representations in public media, in contrast to the capitalist abundance in the works of Warhol and his contemporaries, exposed the social and economic polarizations in the United States in the Civil Rights Era. Our conversations also extended to contemporary concerns regarding food insufficiency and food insecurity among Richmond's poorest, many of them African Americans and children, and of impoverished residents in the city of Ashland, Virginia, where my institution is located.

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<sup>30</sup> Large scale photographic depictions of Civil Rights sit-ins encircle patrons at the restaurant at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, with many of the subjects looking back at the patrons, thus engaging them to contemplate racial marginalizations in the past and in the present.

<sup>31</sup> Students also read Oldenburg's, [“I am For....”](#) of 1961 that situated our discussion about the democratic nature of the artists' statement on the potential pluralism of artistic possibilities and provided entry points to the artist's work.

<sup>32</sup> For the Black Panthers' Free Breakfast for Children Program see, Nik Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival: The Black Panther Party's Radical Antihunger Politics of Social Reproduction and Scale,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, no. 2 (2009): 406-422.



## Experiential Learning

I chose to offer the course in the spring of 2017 in order to capitalize on a wealth of ongoing events in the vicinity that correlated with the thematic focus and the pedagogical objectives of the course. Proximity to plantations and Colonial Williamsburg presented singular opportunities for experiential learning and hands-on activities. Early in the course, students attended a lecture by food historian [Michael Twitty](#), the author of [Afroculinaria](#) who was serving as Colonial Williamsburg's first "[Revolutionary in Residence](#)." Contesting the idealistic interpretations of colonial life, particularly in the sanitized spaces of plantations, Twitty addressed the culinary legacy of African Americans as a site of memory and resistance, and the intersections between African food cultures and the contemporary American culinary landscape. Proclaiming at the outset of the lecture that he confronted all stereotypes as a black, Jewish, homosexual man, Twitty castigated white female docents in plantations whose interpretative narratives often undermined and effaced the experiences of the enslaved, and injected humorously, that he was also a "daughter" of the South and it was his responsibility to insert corrective revisions into the idylls of the American South.

Twitty's comment provided a critical pathway through which we analyzed both the foundational purpose of Colonial Williamsburg, that led Americans to retreat into the misconstrued benign idealism of the colonial past, but also its programmatic initiatives in addressing truthful and inclusive narratives of American colonial life.<sup>33</sup> Discussions in anticipation of our visit to Colonial Williamsburg centered on the significance of these reconstructed spaces in cultivating Americanness through a shared valuation of such colonial sites as potentially didactic spaces reinforcing a sense of belonging for established Americans and for the Americanization of newly-arriving immigrants.<sup>34</sup> Abigail Carroll's study of the multivalent socio-cultural rhetoric of colonial revival kitchens, (ranging from Henry Ford's restoration of Wayside Inn and at Greenfield Village at Dearborn, Michigan to the reconstructed kitchens at Colonial Williamsburg) prompted students to question the purported authenticity of such settings and reconsider them instead as cultural gestures intended to ward

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<sup>33</sup> For the deliberately obliterating framing of such reconstructed spaces see the film by André de la Varre, *Colonial Williamsburg*, 1936 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpoMEzdF7gY> (accessed 20 July 2019).

<sup>34</sup> For the utility of the Colonial Revival in Americanizing efforts see, William B. Rhodes, "The Colonial Revival and the Americanization of Immigrants," in Alan Axelrod, *The Colonial Revival in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985).



off rapid economic, social, and political dislocations and fragmentations in the 1920s.<sup>35</sup>

The implicit theatricality of such dramatic spaces, in which costumed interpreters embrace and enact colonial personalities, anticipated the students' own performative experience at Colonial Williamsburg, where they prepared food for their own consumption at the Governor's kitchen.<sup>36</sup> Students benefited from this immersive experience, working closely with interpreters who offered insights into colonial cooking practices, the chefs who worked at the gubernatorial kitchen in the colonial period, the access to global networks of exchange, and the labor, but also the skills, of the enslaved in colonial society.<sup>37</sup> In experiencing the laborious processes of food preparation and through their kinesthetic experience in these recreated colonial spaces, students became part, if only briefly, of American colonial material culture, albeit from a position of privilege and unencumbered by the racial or gender limitations of the colonial past.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, as Julia Sienkewicz remarked "as bodies ... occupy space through their own mass, weight and material qualities..., human viewers actually interact with objects on material and perceptual levels," thus expanding the possibility of critical cognitive, reflexive learning.<sup>39</sup> In employing interwoven modalities of reinforcing connections between learning, experiencing, and critical interpretation, the course cultivated enduring engagement with the broader socio-cultural conventions that formed its foundation.

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<sup>35</sup> Abigail Carroll, "Of Kettles and Cranes: Colonial Kitchens and the Performance of National Identity," *Winterthur Portfolio* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 335-364.

<sup>36</sup> For the effectiveness of the performative in learning see, John T. Warren, "The Body Politic: Performance, Pedagogy, and the Power of Enfleshment," *Text and Performance Quarterly* (1999): 257-265. Although the performative exercises in this course were not embedded in deeply theoretical concerns as argued in this study, they aimed to engage students with the physicality of laboring to produce a meal in the colonial period, what one of the authors referenced identifies as "social enactment," and the possibilities of thinking about the historical social and racial hierarchies in colonial kitchens and domestic settings. Ibid, 262.

<sup>37</sup> *The National Geographic Magazine* showcased the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg in its April 1937 issue. The only black interpreter included in this feature was a "Mammy" by the kitchen hearth.

<sup>38</sup> My thinking here is dependent on broader conceptions of material culture that include "purposeful human intervention, based on cultural activity" see, Paul E. Bolin and Doug Blandy, "Beyond Visual Culture: Seven Statements of Support for Material Culture Studies in Art Education," *Studies in Art Education* 44, no. 3 (Spring 2003): 250.

<sup>39</sup> Julia Sienkewicz, "Critical Perception: An Exploration of the Cognitive Gains of Material Culture," *Winterthur Portfolio* 47, no. 2/3 (Summer/ Autumn 2013): 118.

Moreover, access to historic sites and museums provided singular opportunities for object-based pedagogical approaches that necessitated critical interrogation not only of the objects and their spatial configurations within exhibition spaces, but also with curatorial messaging.<sup>40</sup> Instead of perusing the art/artifacts on display merely as consumers of the experience, students were called to articulate and justify their understanding of objects on display as critical learners. For example, material and ideological transferences in the transatlantic world, were clearly evidenced in the decorative arts at the De Witt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum at Colonial Williamsburg, that showcase the complex global networks of material mobility available to American colonists. The ongoing exhibition entitled [\*Revolution in Taste\*](#) illustrated the cultural shifts that emerged in the American colonies as rising fortunes cultivated the desire for exotic china, and elegant implements for tea, coffee, and sugar. Having learned about their fraught histories, however, students applied their knowledge in evaluating their more complex narrative trajectories as both aesthetic objects of desire, and as artifacts that sustained exploitative labor practices in the production of tea, sugar, and chocolate. A small [\*Abolition Campaign sugar bowl\*](#), illustrated on one side with the figure of an enslaved black woman in chains and on the opposite side an admonition against the purchase of West India sugar that was produced through slave labor, served as a prime example. Although originally produced in England and marketed to both local populations and the American colonial market, simple everyday objects, such as this sugar cup, fostered the development and support of anti-slavery societies in the United States and abroad.<sup>41</sup>

By extension, our visit to the National Museum of African American History and Culture corroborated in dramatic and provocative ways the dependence of food production on black labor in the antebellum, and the post-emancipation eras. Both through visuals and expansive didactic narratives, the museum conveyed the violent exploitation of enslaved laborers, denouncing objects of material sophistication and cosmopolitanism such as the sterling pot in John Singleton Copley's [\*Portrait of Paul Revere\*](#) (1768, Boston Museum of Fine Arts), as objects subordinated in complex social, racial, and economic hierarchies. The exhibition installation on *Sugar: Driver of the Slave Trade*, made palpable the increasing attachment of colonial Americans to sugar and its broad cultural underpinnings. The rhetorical intensity of the curatorial choice of a large glass case culminating

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<sup>40</sup> For the integration of museum collections and historical sites in object-based learning see, Helen J. Chatterjee et al. *Engaging the Senses: Object-Based Education in Higher Learning* (London: Routledge Press, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> For the production and iconography of anti-slavery ceramics see, Sam Margolin, "'And Freedom to the Slave': Antislavery Ceramics, 1787-1865," *Ceramics in America*, 2002 <http://www.chipstone.org/issue.php/3/Ceramics-in-America-2002> (accessed 3 Dec. 2019).

in a triangle filled with a “sea” of sugar on top of which floats the “vessel” of a sterling tea pot, used for another exotic staple (tea), and a sugar pot and sugar scissors, contrasted with a brass basin for the production of sugar, explicated the interconnectivities between global networks of desirable material luxuries circulating along the same routes as the triangular slave trade.

Finally, our visit to the ongoing exhibition at the National Museum of American History entitled [\*Food: Transforming the American Table 1950-2000\*](#), articulated the multi-ethnic contributions to American foodways, the ways technological innovation transformed the production, processing, and circulation of foodstuff, while also displacing human labor, and the diverse cultural habits that determined alimentary and culinary traditions across the United States. [\*Julia Child’s kitchen\*](#) on view at the museum, an unexpected surprise for students, that contained utensils from the mid-twentieth century combined with more modern ones, spoke to the conflicts between tradition and modernity that were recurring themes throughout the course.<sup>42</sup>

### **Receipts and Research: The Cookbook**

The pedagogical approaches analyzed here, the critical and analytical engagement with scholarship, the reflective study of objects in museum and historic sites, and the analysis of the attendant didactics and narratives at these sites, empowered students to synthesize their learning in their own original research on topics that we had not explored in class. The culminating project for this course was the creation of a cookbook that combined research on an art work or object of material culture, and a family recipe relative to the focus of the paper<sup>43</sup> Students focused their research both on high art but also material culture in the form of advertising campaigns, food packaging, and postcards. They delved deeply into complex art historical and broadly sociological studies to devise papers that demonstrated considerable sophistication in research and a critical understanding of disciplinary methodologies and writing practices.

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<sup>42</sup> Reading and discussions that I did not have the opportunity to discuss here delved into the impact of immigrants on American food cultures and its representation in the visual arts.. We explored for example, the socio-cultural implications in the works of John Sloan including *McSorley’s Bar* (1912, Detroit Institute of Arts), that were bastions of immigrant masculinity, and analyzed the gendered and class implications in John X. Christ’s, “A Short Guide to the Art of Dining, Slumming, Touring, Wildlife, and Women for Hire in New York’s Chinatown and Chinese Restaurants,” *Oxford Art Journal* 26, no. 2 (2003): 73-92.

<sup>43</sup> Surprisingly, many students attested that they had no family recipes and that they rarely enjoyed home-cooked meals with their families.

One of the students explored the potential for liberation in Thomas Waterman Wood's (1823–1903) *Southern Cornfield, Nashville, Tennessee* (1861, Wood Art Gallery), while another analyzed the impact of food advertisements and food-related postcards on the proliferation of racist stereotypes throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. The Great Depression and the tensions between food deprivation in the photographs of Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), Margaret Burke-White (1904–1971) and Walker Evans (1903–1975), and of the fecundity of the land in the works of Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) and the culinary abundance and American well-being in Norman Rockwell's (1894–1978) *As Easy as Pie*, published as a cover for *Saturday Evening Post* in 1935, allowed another student to consider the multi-layered responses among American artists to the devastating impact of the Depression.

Many students explored the meaning of art works depicting women in relation to contemporary gender debates, and public perceptions of American femininity from the post-World War II era to our own time. The student who analyzed Rockwell's, *As Easy as Pie* centered her arguments on the connection between American apple pies, Americanism, and idealized representations of domesticity and womanhood in the postwar period. Along the same theme, another student analyzed these tensions in comparing Doris Lee's [\*Thanksgiving\*](#) (1935, Art Institute of Chicago) and Norman Rockwell's [\*Freedom from Want\*](#) (1943, Norman Rockwell Museum) with reportorial images of food scarcity during the same period and argued for the morality of the home and of motherhood as the much-needed antidotes to the fracturing social and economic realities of the period. The juxtaposition in the student's paper of familial warmth in *Freedom from Want* to Edward Hopper's [\*Nighthawks\*](#) (1942, Art Institute of Chicago) underlined the student's intent in using antithetical images to complicate her respective socio-cultural readings.

Foregrounding feminist readings on the work of Cindy Sherman and her incorporation of foodstuff in many of her photographs, another student discussed the disruptive tension between desire and disgust in the artist's work, but also the consumability of the nude female body in American culture. Americanization, consumerism, and global capitalism were central to two student papers, one on Wayne Thiebaud's [\*Cakes\*](#) (1963, National Gallery of Art) and the other on Andy Warhol's *210 Coca Cola Bottles* (1962, Private Collection). The first explored Thiebaud's cakes as reflective of culinary desirability and nostalgia at a time of mechanical exactitude, reflecting on scholarship that suggests that in their dense, painterly materiality, his works were reminiscent of frosting. Warhol's work served as the departing point for an in-depth exploration of the cultural and economic implications of the universal consumption of Coca-Cola, as the means

of “Americanizing the World with a Cool, Crisp, and Carbonated Coca-Cola,” the title of the student’s paper.

Students probed in-depth complex readings that helped them formulate valid and relevant arguments, that expanded on the interpretative possibilities of their chosen works. They presented and defended their research publicly during the college-wide Research Day in May of 2017, and sold their cookbook at \$5.00 each as part of a fundraiser that also included a bake-sale and food-drive; the sale contributed more than \$200 to the city’s foodbank.

### **Conclusion**

In its combination of close looking and critical reading, alongside experiential learning and research, the course reinforced the potential of this thematic focus for understanding American art and culture. Naturally, this was a self-selective population of strong students who were intentional in their engagement with complex readings and serious in their research and writing. With some modifications, this course can very successfully engage general undergraduate populations and can be adapted to local resources for experiential hands-on opportunities. My students demonstrated enthusiasm for the course and particularly for its experiential components and reported that the course was “transformative,” and “eye opening.” One student remarked that “the course delivered more than it promised” and many assessed that although surprised at the broad political implications of food in American art and culture, they were able to make meaningful and lasting observations about the social, economic, and political relevance of the course in the contemporary context. Lastly, the course yielded two art history majors, a significant percentage out of eleven students, especially considering that the course already included three other declared majors. Both are currently in graduate school in art history and they credit this particular course in germinating their interest in the discipline!